



# about Australia

## Indigenous peoples: an overview

- Before the arrival of European settlers, Indigenous peoples had inhabited the Australian continent for up to 60 000 years. They had complex social systems and highly developed traditions reflecting a deep connection with the land. Across the continent Indigenous peoples spoke hundreds of different languages and dialects and had diverse cultural practices.

The cultures and traditions of Australia's Indigenous peoples are integral to contemporary Australian society and go to the heart of our identity as a modern nation state with a rich and ancient heritage.

### Early history

Archaeologists believe that the first ancestors of Australia's Indigenous peoples arrived on the continent up to 60 000 years ago and that subsequent migration from Asia occurred continuously over tens of thousands of years. There is evidence that the modern Indigenous population was originally composed of several distinct peoples.

Australia's early Indigenous peoples learnt to adapt to the changing climatic conditions, including frequent droughts, of the world's driest inhabited continent. They constructed shelters and windbreaks from a variety of materials and wore cloaks, skirts, belts and footwear to protect themselves from the elements. Their clothing also served to adorn the body and mark aspects of identity, like age and gender. As hunter-gatherers, traditional Indigenous peoples used many tools, including boomerangs, spears, nets and fish hooks.

### Population

The Indigenous population at the time of European settlement is estimated to have been at least 315 000.

In the years that followed, the Indigenous population declined significantly as a result of increased mortality and reduced fertility, and by the 1930s the total Australian Indigenous population was estimated to be only 20 per cent of its original size.

Following a referendum in 1967, the Australian Constitution was altered to allow the Commonwealth Parliament to make laws with respect to Aboriginal people, and to include them in national censuses, from which they had been largely absent.

In the 2006 census, 455 031 people identified themselves as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander, comprising 2.3 per cent of the total Australian population. Between 1996 and 2001, the average annual growth rate of the Indigenous population was 2 per cent, compared with 1.18 per cent for the total Australian population.

The 2006 census also found that the Indigenous population is younger than the non-Indigenous population, with a median age of 21 years compared to 37 years for

non-Indigenous Australians. Only 3 per cent of Indigenous Australians are aged 65 years or older, compared to 13 per cent of non-Indigenous Australians.

## Identity

In contemporary Australia, many Australians who identify themselves as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander have both Indigenous and non-Indigenous ancestors. Australian governments do not examine the extent of people's Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander ancestry. To benefit from special government programs, Indigenous people must satisfy three requirements. They must:

1. be of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander descent
2. identify as being Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander
3. be accepted as such by the community in which they live.

In 2002, the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Survey found that just over 50 per cent of Indigenous respondents identified with a clan, tribal or language group.

## Location

More than half of Australia's Indigenous population lives in either New South Wales or Queensland. In 2006, these states were home to 138 507 and 127 580 people respectively. Of all the states and territories, the Northern Territory has the highest proportion of Indigenous people, who make up 27.8 per cent of the territory's population.

Just over half the Indigenous population lives in or close to major cities but, as a proportion

of Australia's total population, Indigenous people are far more likely than non-Indigenous people to live in rural or remote areas. Nationally, Indigenous people make up 24 per cent of Australians living in remote or very remote areas and just 1 per cent of those living in major cities.

## Language

Before Europeans arrived in Australia, about 250 diverse Indigenous languages were spoken. Some of these are still spoken today but many have died out.

In 2006, 55 695 or 11 per cent of Indigenous people spoke an Indigenous language at home. Indigenous languages were more likely to be spoken in the centre and north of Australia than in the southern cities. In the Northern Territory, for example, 54 per cent of Indigenous people spoke an Indigenous language at home.

## Spirituality

Most Indigenous belief systems centre on the 'Dreaming' or 'Dreamtime' to explain life and the origin of the world. In the Dreaming, ancestral beings created features of the land, sea and sky, as well as humans, animals and plants. The Dreaming describes the actions and travels of these beings, some of whom were themselves transformed into features of the landscape, like the Three Sisters rock formation in the Blue Mountains.

These beliefs have governed every aspect of Indigenous peoples' lives and relationships with the land. They are the subject of traditional stories, music and artwork across the continent.

### Art and culture

Australian Indigenous art is one of the oldest continuous art traditions in the world. The earliest Indigenous art forms were paintings and engravings on boulders, rock shelters and cave walls, some of which date back 30 000 years. Modern Indigenous paintings are the most recent expression of this tradition, which is now acclaimed in Australia and internationally. Body painting, tree carving, bark painting, weaving and sculpture are other traditional Indigenous art forms. Contemporary Indigenous art also includes printmaking, fabric printing, ceramics and glassmaking.

Indigenous peoples have a rich musical tradition and celebrate the deeds and journeys of their creator ancestors in ceremonial song and dance. Traditional Indigenous music was predominantly vocal but musical instruments like didgeridoos were used as accompaniments. Today, Indigenous performing arts feature in cultural festivals across Australia. New styles of Indigenous music have developed and merged with other musical genres, like rock music.

### Land rights

The expression 'native title' is used in Australian law to describe the communal, group or individual rights and interests that Aboriginal peoples or Torres Strait Islanders hold in land or waters according to their traditional laws and customs.

In a decision of the High Court of Australia in 1992, Eddie Mabo was the first Indigenous person to have native title rights recognised on behalf of the Meriam people. The court rejected the idea that Australia had been *terra nullius*—land belonging to no one—at the time of British settlement.

The Mabo decision led to the establishment of the *Native Title Act 1993*, which recognises and protects native title throughout Australia.

### Issues today

*Reconciliation:* The Australian Government is committed to the process of reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. Reconciliation involves symbolic recognition of the honoured place of the first Australians and the implementation of practical and effective measures to address the legacy of profound economic and social disadvantage experienced by many Indigenous Australians, particularly in health, education, employment and housing.

The Australian Government takes a leading role in reconciliation through its pursuit of practical and symbolic measures that have a positive effect on the everyday lives of Indigenous Australians.

*Stolen generation:* From 1910 until 1970, between 10 and 30 per cent of Indigenous children were forcibly removed from their families under state and federal child welfare and protection laws. The Australian Government now recognises that the separation of Indigenous children from their families inflicted profound suffering and loss on many Indigenous Australians. On 13 February 2008, Prime Minister Kevin Rudd formally apologised to Indigenous Australians for the removal of children from their families and communities and pledged to improve Indigenous education, health and housing.

*Education, health and housing:* Indigenous Australians experience significant socioeconomic disadvantage compared with non-Indigenous Australians. The Australian Government is committed to closing the

gaps that exist between Indigenous and non-Indigenous life expectancy, educational achievement, employment opportunities and housing.

Educationally, fewer Indigenous students attend and finish school than non-Indigenous students. In 2005, the proportion of Indigenous students who completed their secondary education (Year 12 in Australian schools) was 49 per cent, compared with 87 per cent for non-Indigenous students. The academic performance of Australia's Indigenous students is consistently lower than that of non-Indigenous students. In 2004, the proportion of Indigenous students in Year 7 meeting national education benchmarks was lower than for all Australian students: 71 per cent of Indigenous students reached reading benchmarks compared with 91 per cent of non-Indigenous students, and 52 per cent of Indigenous students met numeracy benchmarks compared with 82 per cent of non-Indigenous students.

From 1996 to 2001, life expectancy at birth was estimated to be 59 years for Indigenous men and 65 years for Indigenous women, whereas in the general population in 1998–2000 it was 77 years for men and 82 years for women. In 2004–05, 65 per cent of Indigenous people had at least one long-term health condition and Indigenous people were more than 10 times as likely as non-Indigenous people to have kidney disease, and three times as likely to have diabetes. Indigenous people were also hospitalised at higher rates than non-Indigenous people.

Indigenous people tend to experience lower housing standards than other Australians, especially in remote communities. Overcrowding is a particular problem and is associated with poor health outcomes.

The 2004–05 National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Survey found that 27 per cent of Indigenous people were living in overcrowded conditions.

### Further information

Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs  
[www.fahcsia.gov.au](http://www.fahcsia.gov.au)

Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies  
[www.aiatsis.gov.au](http://www.aiatsis.gov.au)

[www.dfat.gov.au/facts/admin\\_indigenous\\_affairs.html](http://www.dfat.gov.au/facts/admin_indigenous_affairs.html)

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Western Australia coastline.

